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ABSTRACT

Taken from findings of federally financed ABC dropout prevention programs--ALAS (Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success), the Belief Academy, and Check & Connect--this report discusses the barriers and supports to effectively intervening and achieving school completion among high-risk students. The first section presents information on the extent of the dropout problem among high-risk youth and tentative information about effective prevention strategies. The following effective intervention elements are identified and discussed: long-term commitment; continuous monitoring; individualized focus; skill acquisition; collaboration across home, school, and community; and parent involvement. The second section includes a list and examples of common practices and policies that either support or alienate youth with disabilities at risk of dropping out of school. Assessment worksheets designed to stimulate discussion among educators are provided in the third section. Appendices further explain data, list and rank supportive and alienating practices and policies, and describe the three ABC projects. (CR)

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Tip the Balance: Policies & Practices That Influence School Engagement for Youth at High Risk for Dropping Out

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Tip the Balance: Practices & Policies That Influence School Engagement for Youth at High Risk for Dropping Out

Part of the ABC Dropout Prevention and Intervention Series

Published December, 1995.

Written by Sandra Christenson, Mary Sinclair, Martha Thurlow, and David Evelo.
This product reflects the collective efforts of all project directors.
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Introduction

School administrators will find this publication a helpful assessment tool for examining the barriers and supports present in school, home, and community settings that affect middle school youth at high risk for dropping out of school. This booklet's purpose is to provide a structure for school personnel to critique their practices and to discuss their potential effect on students' engagement with school, particularly for youth with learning and emotional and behavioral difficulties.

The barriers and supports listed in this booklet reflect the insights and observations of educators and researchers from the three ABC projects who have worked for the past five years in urban school districts to intervene and promote school completion among high-risk students. It is our hope that readers will find our reflections beneficial in the process of examining local school practices and making decisions about how to increase school holding power.

Each of the ABC projects intervened with high-risk youth from a slightly different vantage point. One created its own academy in order to gain leverage over the policies and practices established within the school environment. It found the severity of the problems students and their families brought to school to be the greatest challenge. Another project worked very closely with a unique population of families and youth with learning and behavioral difficulties to create an independent program of support within a large district middle school. From this vantage point, the project had greatest difficulty with the rigidity of the existing school system and its limited capacity to adjust to the needs of youth with disabilities and language barriers. The third project focused mostly on forging stronger connections between home and school, as well as facilitating communication among educators within the schools. From this third vantage point, the greatest challenges arose from the chaotic flow of resources and the absence of systems or structures within schools and community services necessary to keep high-risk youth in school.

The barriers and supports discussed in this booklet reflect the experiences that were common to the ABC projects despite their diverse perspectives on the dropout problem. These collective experiences are offered to stimulate discussion among educators who are attempting to create collaborative environments that increase holding power for students. The list of practices and policies is not exhaustive, but rather include those issues that were frequently confronted by at least two of the three projects.

This booklet is organized into three sections. The first provides summary information about our frame of reference going into the project – the extent of the dropout problem among high-risk youth and tentative information about effective prevention strategies, including speculation about the significance surrounding the interactions of a youth's home, school, and community. The second section provides a list and examples of the most common practices and polices that served to either support or alienate youth with disabilities at high risk for dropping out of school. The third section contains assessment worksheets designed to stimulate discussion and reflection among educators who are attempting to promote school engagement and high school completion among youth at high risk for dropping out.

Frame of Reference

The design of the three projects was guided by the existing knowledge base. Project personnel were aware of the extent and costs of the dropout problem, as well as recommended prevention strategies. To the greatest extent possible, the projects incorporated these preventive intervention strategies into their project design in order to investigate their effectiveness for youth with behavioral and learning difficulties.

Recognition of the Problem

Current demands of the labor market dictate that the majority of prospective employees have at least a high school diploma and the skills commonly associated with a high school diploma, if not a college degree or specialized training experience. The National Education Goal 2 states that by the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%. The objectives for this goal include reducing the national dropout rate, increasing the number of school dropouts who complete a high school degree or its equivalent, and eliminating the gap between students from minority backgrounds and their non-minority counterparts.[1] While data from all school-age youth in the United States combined indicates that school completion rates are heading in the right direction – reaching 85% in 1992[2] – we know this rate of success is not the case for all students. Approximately 25% of the sixteen to twenty-four year old students from low income families in 1992 had left school without graduating, and close to 30% of students of color in the same age range were no longer in school.[3] Among a cohort of youth with disabilities, dropout rates are as high as 36% for youth with learning disabilities and 59% for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.[4]

The costs and consequences of dropping out are high for both the individual and society. Youth who do not complete high school are more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, incarceration, and long-term dependency on social services. Unemployment rates for school dropouts are as much as forty percent higher than for youth who have completed school – particularly for youth with disabilities.[5] National studies have found that youth who drop out are two to four times more likely than graduates to be arrested within just a few years after leaving school.[6] Four out of every five federal prisoners in the United States have not completed high school. Approximately $51,000 is spent annually to incarcerate one person.[7] The estimated annual cost to society for failing to prevent youth from dropping out of school is $76 billion a year – approximately $800 annually per taxpayer.[8]

Recognition of Intervention Strategies

Multiple interventions have been suggested to reduce dropout rates. Counseling, tutoring, and mentoring have been cited as promising practices.[9] Literature on school effectiveness indicates that multicultural curricula, varied instructional methods, and parent involvement are positively associated with student achievement.[10] However, strong empirical evidence documenting the effectiveness of such programs continues to be scarce. Furthermore, the majority of the dropout literature has been based on general education students. Until recently, little research has examined the applicability of the knowledge base for

youth with disabilities who are at highest risk for dropping out.

The ABC project directors hypothesized that critical intervention strategies for youth with disabilities would be similar to those recommended for general education students, but perhaps would need to be more systematic and comprehensive. It was speculated that promising strategies would include or promote several key elements. It was commonly agreed that prevention and intervention efforts targeting the youth and families should be long-term. It was understood that leaving school prior to graduation was not an instantaneous event. Rather, dropping out of school was the outcome of a process of disengagement and alienation, marked by absenteeism, tardiness, failing classes, suspension, and movement from school to school. Therefore, continuous monitoring of the high-risk youth, and those variables that indicate increased withdrawal, was needed. Furthermore, the projects assumed that multicomponent strategies that addressed the individual needs of students and their families were needed. We knew that youth drop out of school for various reasons and that school dropouts were a heterogeneous group. Therefore, a singular approach to preventing students from dropping out was deemed insufficient. It was important that strategies intended to keep students engaged in school meet the individualized needs of each learner. In addition, the projects advocated that enduring strategies should focus on building capacity and enhancing competencies of multiple contexts, as well as in the student. An emphasis on skill acquisition and student support within the natural environment was important. The context of the students' home, school, and community was regarded as highly significant for the development of adolescents. Collaborative efforts were perceived as critical in order to sufficiently address the dropout problem and to provide the necessary educational support for high-risk youth.

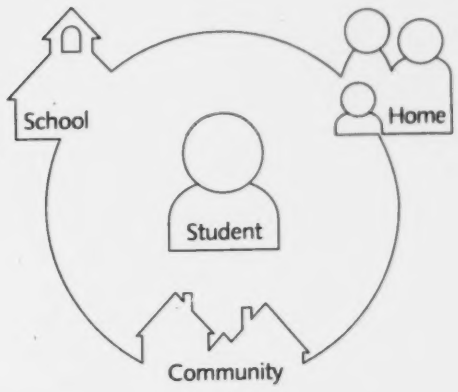
Intervention Elements

- *Long-term commitment*
- *Continuous monitoring*
- *Individualized focus*
- *Skill acquisition*
- *Collaboration across home, school, and community*
- *Parent involvement*

No single constituency could be expected to increase a school's holding power in and of itself. The collaborative participation of families, schools, and communities was viewed as a vital element in the process of changing practices and policies of the interconnected systems that influence students' engagement with school. The involvement of parents, in particular, was embedded within the collaborative intervention approach given the strong association between parent support for learning and positive student outcomes.

Existing Supports & Barriers

Our observations and insights regarding existing supports and barriers confirmed the importance of three key environments – school, home, and community. Because the development of adolescents is influenced both by all three environments and the degree to which harmony exists among these spheres of influence, we believed – and continue to advocate – that a collaborative approach to preventing dropping out among high-risk youth is essential. This section presents the list of practices and policies that served to either support or alienate youth at high risk for dropping out of school that were common to each of the ABC project sites. Examples are included of each support or barrier within the context of either the student's school, home, or community.



Supports in Brief

The list of supportive practices and policies is shorter than the list of barriers. We all found that there were bits and pieces of supportive programs for high-risk youth in each of the school districts, but we also found that the services were neither comprehensive nor systematic enough to meet the needs of youth with the confounding difficulties of poverty, mobility, learning, behavior, and language. It was our common experience that schools did address multicultural recognition through various festivals and cultural activities and that some efforts at school reform and urban outreach were made (i.e., creating teams within schools, innovatively reaching out to parents, and providing after-school activities). Family members of these high-risk youth made valuable contributions when reached out to and given the opportunity to collaborate. Parents genuinely cared and loved their children, for whom they wanted successful school experiences. When used, the supportive family practices included attending IEP and other school meetings, supervising and monitoring their adolescents' behaviors and school work, and having an understanding of the nature of their adolescents' disabilities. Supportive community practices – when offered – included the availability and timely access to resources and programs that promoted well-being and independence among youth and families. The limited community supports that existed ranged from federal jobs programs to business partnerships and nonprofit community organizations.

Barriers in Brief

It was our common experience that a weak infrastructure within the school environment interfered with optimal achievement. A weak infrastructure was defined by such things as minimal amounts of teacher planning time, inadequate communication systems for school personnel, limited financial and educational resources, and school staff who were underprepared to deal with the challenging needs of today's youth. Families encountered excessive demands and stressors on a daily basis, including mobility, poverty, safety, health and disability issues. The repeated challenge of finding new housing – for example – and mov-

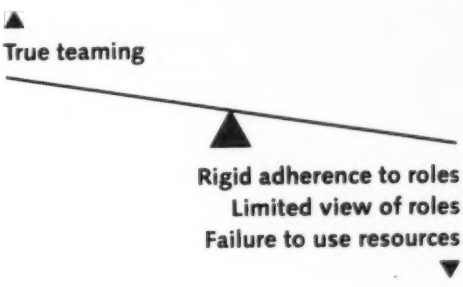
ing to a new location without a car or the resources to afford the move interfered with a family's ability to promote regular school attendance, to provide youth with quiet study space in the home, or to be contacted by the schools. Fragmented services in the community were problematic and characterized by turf battles or disjointed and often inaccessible resources. In some cases, waiting lists at community mental health centers were over six months long. High rates of community staff turnover made it difficult for school staff to establish an enduring or efficient relationship with support service organizations.

The main text includes the supports and barriers that occurred most frequently across at least two projects. See appendices A and B for an explanation of the procedures used to generate this information and a full list of the issues.

PLEASE NOTE: Each section begins with a summary chart which identifies supports with an upright triangle – ▲ – while barriers are marked by an inverted triangle – ▼. The same items are used in the main text to highlight supports and barriers. The list of practices and policies are those that existed in schools independent of our intervention efforts and not all categories feature both supports and barriers.

SCHOOL

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES



▲ ***True teaming in a restructured school***

Examples: A group of teachers who collaborate effectively, use interdisciplinary curriculum units, exercise flexible scheduling, and share responsibility for all their students. Five teachers who have designed a curriculum unit on Ethiopia during their joint prep period. Students who are given the assignment of developing a final product that will be worked on in all their classes – math, science, English, social studies, art, etc.

▼ ***Rigid adherence to roles and boundaries of school personnel***

Examples: Secondary school educators who do not perceive their role to go beyond imparting content information. A teacher who will not deal with adolescent behavioral needs and sends any disruptive student to the office without any discussion with the student. A teacher who routinely uses lecture and worksheet format under the assumption that the student is solely responsible for staying motivated.

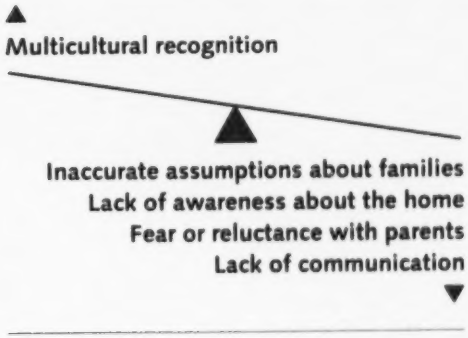
▼ ***Staff overwhelmed by many issues and have limited view of roles and responsibilities***

Examples: Schools that do not clearly define job descriptions for their staff when the needs of the students exceed basic instructional supports. School districts that do not provide staff with the necessary resources to meet their student needs. A science teacher who is unwilling to implement the district's social skills curriculum and to facilitate role plays during the mandatory student-teacher advisory period.

▼ ***School's failure to adequately use community resources and family resources coming into and reaching out to the schools***

Examples: School staff that do not perceive it as their responsibility to be aware of the resources available within the community and families of the students. New school programs that are planned without any community or parent input.

Awareness & Communication



▲ ***Multicultural recognition***

Examples: Schools that systematically include different cultural traditions and historical perspectives when communicating with youth and in everyday activities, in addition to special events and festivals. A school that uses a social studies curriculum that contains information from all parts of the world with equal emphasis. A teacher that is sensitive to cultural customs when relating to and disciplining a student, for example, by being aware that some cultures perceive making eye contact as disrespectful.

▼ ***Teachers' inaccurate assumptions about families***

Examples: School staff that believe families don't care about their kids because they do not attend school functions or are not available to meet at times designated by the school. School staff that interpret a parent's feelings of humility and intimidation or anger and resentment as not caring to support the school.

▼ ***Lack of school awareness about the home***

Examples: Schools that do not provide opportunities for staff to make routine home visits or do not encourage their staff to become familiar with their student's neighborhoods. School staff that do not make home visits because of perceived or real language and cultural barriers. A teacher that calls home several times in the morning and in the evening, and no one answers the phone; the teacher may assume that the parent is being neglectful, when in reality the parent works two jobs to make ends meet.

▼ ***Fears or reluctance about interactions with parents***

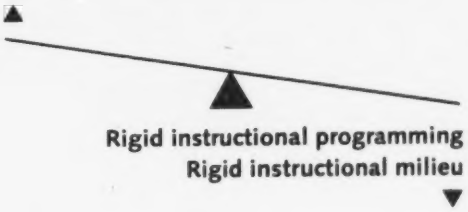
Examples: Schools that do not assist staff in overcoming misconceptions and stereotypes regarding families and the communities in which they teach in order to facilitate home-school communication. School staff that do not attend evening parent meetings in the community because of their fear of driving into certain neighborhoods that are most easily accessible to parents and community members.

▼ ***Lack of effective communication within the school and between home and school and failure to act upon communication***

Examples: Schools that rely on incidental interaction and personal communiqués to exchange critical information about students. Sixty school staff members that are expected to regularly communicate with parents, with access only to two or three phones lines located in the front office and no privacy. Parents of at-risk youth who do not have phones or

move frequently and do not provide schools with a means of getting in touch with them. Parents that do not speak English and teachers that only speak English.

Instructional Practices



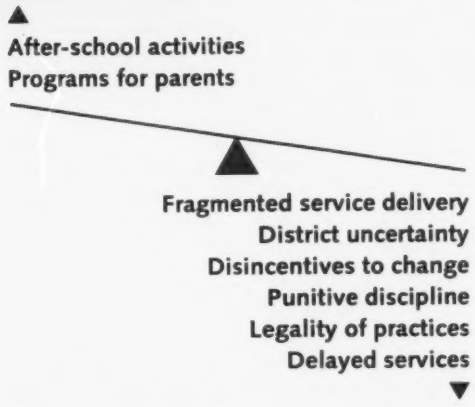
▼ ***Failure to make instructional accommodations for students served in regular education classrooms***

Examples: Schools that do not provide time and resources to allow special and regular education teachers to plan for the individual instructional needs of youth with disabilities. A math teacher who requires every student to complete nine worksheet packets per grading period, regardless of their specific educational and special needs.

▼ ***Rigid instructional programming and schedule of the institution drives practice***

Examples: A student who was not given the opportunity to participate in a community service program, to promote self-esteem and academic confidence, because class schedules could not be rearranged. A student who is acting out in art class is not transferred into music where she had success because students are not allowed to repeat classes.

Organizational Resources & Characteristics



▲ ***After-school activities that include transportation***

Examples: School and community programs that offer activities after school and that facilitate student participation by providing transportation, as well as assistance with signing up students, waiving fees for low income youth, or helping adolescents match their interests with the available options. A school staff person who talks with students about which activities best match their interests and helps them complete the registration forms and fee waiver applications.

▲ ***Access to GED, English as a second language, and occupational programs for family members with provision of child care***

Examples: Schools and community programs that solicit and then support parents and other family members who are interested in completing their general education development requirements or becoming more proficient in the English language. A school social worker who helps a parent or older sibling locate a word processing or GED preparation program and perhaps drives the individual to the first session.

▼ ***Fragmented service delivery to youth in different schools and across systems***

Examples: Highly specialized support programs and services that are neither well coordinated nor systematically offered in all schools within a district, so that services are deliv-

ered in piecemeal fashion. A student at one school who has access to a county mental health specialist two days a week through an on-site mini-clinic compared to a student across town with similar needs who will have to wait for several weeks to see a county psychologist because no mini-clinic exists at his or her school.

▼ ***District- and school-level uncertainty resulting in last-minute planning and chaotic implementation***

Examples: District- and school-level uncertainty that stems from short-term leadership (i.e., average stay of superintendents is only four to five years) and school budgets that are tied to state and federal funding which does not always coincide with the school years. Programming funds that are not made available until the middle of the summer – which allows for only two to three *weeks* rather than the necessary two to three *months* of planning and implementation time.

▼ ***Systemic disincentives to change and innovation***

Examples: School staff salaries that are based solely on level of education and number of years in the district – not student outcomes, quality of service, or staff performance. Union policies that allow teachers to bid into new positions based on seniority and minimum competencies, giving program directors little or no control over who they can hire into their programs.

▼ ***Punitive disciplinary practices not designed to change behavior***

Examples: Schools that contribute to student absences through out-of-school suspension for nonviolent behaviors (such as tardiness), rather than keep kids in school and teach them more socially acceptable ways to solve their problems. Schools that disrupt a student's education by transferring the youth to another school to get a "fresh" start.

▼ ***Legality of special education practices***

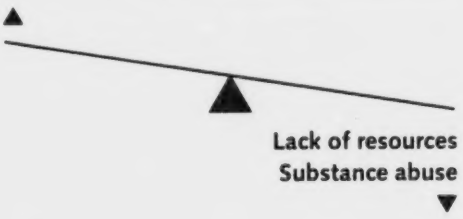
Examples: Schools that push the limits of due process proceedings, such as not completing assessments in the required amount of time, not systematically inviting regular education teachers to IEP meetings, or terminating students from special education services due to absences without parents true informed consent.

▼ ***Delay in time between IEP assessment and placement, such that services occur long after assessment***

Examples: School staff that allow a two-week period to elapse before the appropriate teachers and program coordinators meet to discuss a student's file and determine who will be the designated case manager and who will be responsible for following up on all the logistical details of transportation, scheduling, and so on. In the meantime, the student drops out, is suspended, or continues to fail in the general education program.

Family

Physical & Mental Health



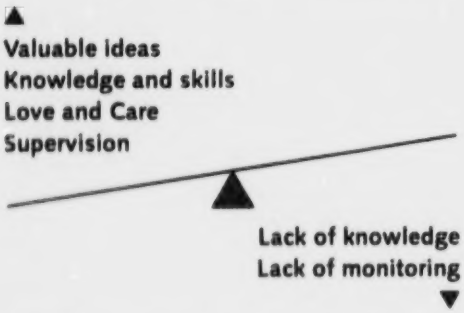
▼ ***Physical and mental health supports coupled with lack of resources to address needs***

Examples: Family members who are physically unable to advocate for their adolescent if a school problem arises due to a lack of skill, strength, or energy associated with their health. A parent who keeps older children home from school in order to compensate for the parent's poor health and inability to provide adequate care for younger children. An older sibling who does not understand the special needs diagnosis, but serves as the school-home liaison.

▼ ***Chemical, alcohol, and substance abuse in families***

Examples: Family members who abuse chemicals or other substances in a way that interferes with their ability to provide psychological and educational support to their children. A parent who does not wake up in the morning due to alcohol abuse, and subsequently does not get their adolescent out of bed and ready for school. Cousins or young adult relatives who abuse drugs and who are role models to the adolescent.

Parental Skills & Knowledge



▲ ***Contribution of solutions and ideas by parents when encouraged and given the opportunity to become collaborative partners***

Examples: Family members who provide solutions to school problems or specific student-related issues, when reached. A working group of parents and teachers who initiate and implement a homework hot-line in response to parents' concerns about students' homework assignments. A counselor and parent who develop a daily note for home regarding the students behavior and agree on home incentives for improved school behavior.

▲ ***Application of strategies that have been identified and discussed among other parents and school staff***

Examples: Parents or family members who are not sure about how to be supportive are able to assist with their adolescents' education when provided with the appropriate information and strategies. A parent attends an evening workshop in a neighborhood setting and applies teachers' tips on how to assist with math assignments. Another parent relates that increased telephone privileges has been a positive reinforcer for reducing foul or inappropriate language.

▲ ***Parents who love and care about their children***

Examples: Parents and family members who want their children to succeed and to do well in school. A parent who expresses high expectations and aspirations for their adolescent even if they do not know how to monitor the adolescent's school attendance and completion of assignments.

▲ ***Supervision – good parenting, in conjunction with monitoring***

Examples: Parents or family members who know where their children are at most times of the day and who routinely check up on their children's educational progress. A parent who checks in daily from work with a neighbor or caretaker to make sure their adolescent arrived home safely and at a reasonable time.

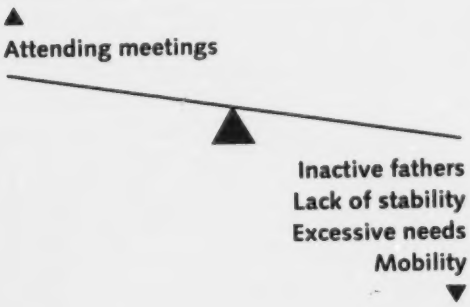
▼ ***Lack of knowledge about and/or use of alternative discipline practices at home***

Examples: Family members who rely solely on punitive discipline or a single means of discipline that does not result in the desired change in behavior. A parent who repeatedly engages in a power struggle with an adolescent and is unable to move beyond the conflict.

▼ ***Families not monitoring the behaviors and activities of children***

Examples: Family members who do not take an active role communicating with school staff and their adolescents regarding academic progress and school expectations. A parent who does not realize that the youth is supposed to be completing homework assignments four nights a week. A parent who does not monitor gang-related clothing or where their adolescent is "hanging out."

Family Stability & Resources



▲ ***Attending IEP and other school meetings***

Examples: Parents or family members who regularly attend meetings regarding the student's educational progress or actively find other means to communicate with teachers if they are unable to attend the scheduled meetings. A parent who brings an older sibling or friend to translate from English at the meeting.

▼ ***Inactive or uninvolved fathers***

Examples: Mothers who assume total responsibility for their children's' physical and emotional well-being without any support from their fathers. Adolescents who have outgrown their mothers and who physically intimidate them in the absence of the father. A mother who is reluctant to tell a father about their adolescent's school problems because the father blames her for the youth's misbehavior.

▼ ***Lack of stability of family configuration and location; unpredictable family life***

Examples: Households in which multiple families or extended families reside on a temporary basis or adolescents who move around among different family members, with whom the rules and expectations may be different. A parent or another family member in one

setting may confront a adolescent's substance abuse, but then the issue is dropped when the student moves in with an extended family member who is either more tolerant or unaware of the adolescent's behavior.

▼ ***Excessive needs of kids and families and the amount of effort required***

Examples: Families whose economic, social, and emotional needs surpass the resources and expertise of school systems and community organizations. A family that is homeless and relies on agencies for shelter, which may be located in or out of the city. The student does not have to change schools, but district transportation will not cross the city limits and the family does not own a car, nor does the adolescent have funds or skills to learn new public transportation routes every few weeks.

▼ ***Mobility of families***

Examples: Families and students who lack stability because of movement from residence to residence and school to school. A student, who has a learning disability and difficulty adapting to new settings, attends three elementary schools, changes middle schools two times, and attends four senior high schools.

Community

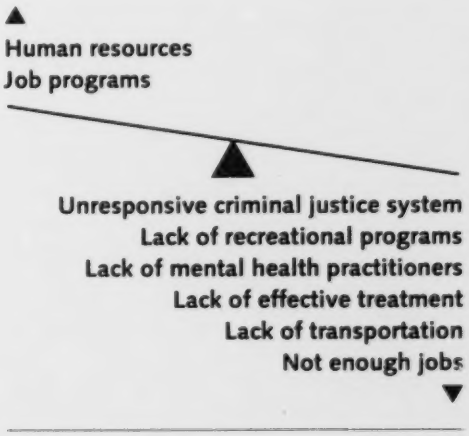
Availability & Access

▲ ***Human resources in the community***

Examples: Organizations and personnel in the community who are readily available to provide support services to at-risk youth in conjunction with the schools. An outreach worker who brings a student to a neighborhood community center to pick out a coat and gloves for the winter season at the request of a teacher. A counselor who refers a parent to a job training or mental health program.

▲ ***Federal jobs programs***

Examples: When available, students with disabilities who are given the opportunity to gain experience working in an office, landscaping, or providing child care.



▼ ***Criminal justice system is unresponsive to youth's needs***

Examples: An overwhelmed and understaffed criminal justice system that, by default, defers consequences until too late and is unable to get treatment in place in a timely fashion. A social worker and parent who are frustrated about the two-month waiting period for a court date to address the student's patterns of truancy and curfew violations.

▼ ***Lack of recreational programs for youth after school and in the summer***

Examples: Organized and supervised leisure activities that are not readily available for adolescents in many neighborhoods. Parents who are reluctant to allow their adolescents

to participate in recreational programs because the programs do not offer supervised transportation and public transportation is not safe after dark.

▼ ***Lack of mental health practitioners, especially with ethnic and lingual match***

Examples: A waiting list of three or four weeks in a low-cost mental health clinic. A county that is well staffed with mental health workers, but with staff whose cultural and language characteristics do not reflect the clients they serve. A day treatment center whose staff primarily speak English, but whose client's parents speak predominantly Spanish.

▼ ***Lack of effective treatment programs***

Examples: Community treatment programs for substance abuse that are viewed as detrimental for youth rather than a resource, because the programs are punitive and unnecessarily rule bound. A student is kicked out of residential treatment for the very behavior for which the youth was referred.

▼ ***Lack of transportation***

Examples: A city-wide transportation system that is inefficient and inconvenient for many communities in the area in relation to the school site. A parent may have to transfer buses two or three times, which may take over an hour time each way to commute to a forty-five-minute meeting at the school site.

▼ ***Not enough job slots for all youth who would like to work***

Examples: Limited availability of private sector entry-level employment opportunities for adolescents in metropolitan areas. For students with disabilities who are at high risk for dropping out, public summer job slots are highly competitive and more difficult to obtain with the reduction of federal and state dollars.

Community Safety & Cohesion

▲
Community services in schools
Business partnerships
Safety units

Stratified community practices
Lack of community safety
▼

▲ ***Service organizations that come into schools to offer support and to provide services***

Examples: Organizations that reach out to the schools and schools that solicit and utilize their services. A local women's college that runs a student support group on women's issues in the schools. A community advocacy group that provides mentors to youth through the schools. Existing tutoring programs offered within the district and community that work with the schools to actively provide tutoring and academic remedial services for students. Staff from nonprofit organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club, that facilitate support groups weekdays after school. Existing local parks and recreational programs that work collaboratively with the schools to develop student programs or to facilitate student participation.

▲ ***Business partnerships***

Examples: A business community or business council that formally develops working relationships between the area schools or school districts and local businesses. Schools that maximize the human and financial resources of their business partner. Staff from the busi-

ness partnership who volunteer their time in conjunction with school staff to host back to school activities, such as an annual spaghetti dinner event.

▲ ***Community safety units, neighborhood watch, block captains, etc.***

Examples: A neighborhood block club that collaborates with the police and other neighborhood resources to shut down a crack house on the block.

▼ ***Lack of community safety***

Examples: Inner-city neighborhoods that are – or are perceived to be – violent and threatening. A student who is repeatedly absent from school because she or he is afraid to walk six blocks and wait in the dark for the school bus to arrive.

▼ ***Community practices that increase stratification between class and race***

Examples: Low income housing policies, construction of freeways and placement of exits ramps, the presence or perception of gang activity in neighborhoods that can intimidate and minimize interaction within some communities, resulting in neighborhoods becoming isolated. Students who rarely have the opportunity to see their teachers doing everyday activities, such as grocery shopping or mowing the lawn, because students and teachers generally do not live in the same neighborhoods.

A Challenge for the Future

While the ABC projects were located in three different cities, we shared a similar focus on urban education and youth challenged by multiple risk factors – poverty, mobility, learning and behavior difficulties, and language. Our goal in developing this booklet was twofold. First, we wanted to identify the policies and practices common to all three projects and to share those observations regarding the barriers and supports that significantly influenced a student's connection with school. We recognize that your schools, families, and communities may be different from our urban environments, but we believe all educators share in their concerns for the National Education Goal 2 regarding youth at high risk for dropping out. Second, we hope that this booklet and the corresponding assessment tool is helpful to you in identifying and addressing practices and policies in your school that inhibit and facilitate students' engagement with school and progress toward successfully completing school.

Next Steps

- *Establish a home/school/community action-research team.*
- *Review this and other ABC publications.*
- *Examine the policies and practices that influence your at-risk youth.*
- *Prioritize barriers you can minimize and supports you can enhance.*
- *Brainstorm a list of action steps that can be taken to address the selected issues.*
- *Identify indicators of success.*
- *Develop and implement your action plan – and give yourself time to revise and refine the plan.*
- *Evaluate progress in relation to the indicators of success.*

■ The Assessment Worksheets

The following section provides a guided exercise to facilitate discussion and reflection among educators who are attempting to address Goal 2 of the National Education Goals and to increase the school completion rate to 90% for all students. Using the attached assessment forms, consider the ratio of barriers to supports for students about whom you are most concerned. Do the barriers exceed the supports available to help youth stay connected to school? In order to help youth at high risk for school failure, explore where you are along the continuum. Recognizing barriers to effective service delivery may serve as a common point of understanding among educators, parents, and the broader community and may facilitate collaborative efforts to maximize and mobilize supports that are available within each context. Schools need the resources and support of parents and community professionals to optimize students' progress toward high school graduation. Serving at-risk youth and their families requires a high level of communication, coordination, and collaboration. Still, as overwhelming as the dropout problem may seem, we believe a collaborative effort can make a difference and can tip the balance.

School Practices & Policies Assessment Worksheet

Fill in a description of the policies of your school or school district. What policies or practices serve as school-related barriers and supports for students at high risk for dropping out of school? Which way does the balance tip?

▲ *Supports*	▼ *Barriers*

Review of ABC project school supports and barriers:

Roles & Responsibilities

- ▲ True teaming
- ▼ Rigid adherence to roles
- ▼ Limited view of roles
- ▼ Failure to use resources

Awareness & Communication

- ▲ Multicultural recognition
- ▼ Inaccurate assumptions about families
- ▼ Lack of awareness about the home
- ▼ Fear or reluctance with parents
- ▼ Lack of communication

Instructional Practices

- ▲ —
- ▼ Rigid instructional programming
- ▼ Rigid instructional milieu

Organizational Resources

- ▲ After-school activities
- ▲ Programs for parents
- ▼ Fragmented service delivery
- ▼ District uncertainty
- ▼ Disincentives to change
- ▼ Punitive discipline
- ▼ Legality of practices
- ▼ Delayed services

Family Practices & Policies Assessment Worksheet

Fill in a description of the policies of your school or school district. What policies or practices serve as family-related barriers and supports for students at high risk for dropping out of school? Which way does the balance tip?

▲ *Supports*	▼ *Barriers*

Review of ABC project family supports and barriers:

Physical & Mental Health

- ▲ —
- ▼ Lack of resources
- ▼ Substance abuse

Family Stability & Resources

- ▲ Attending meetings
- ▼ Inactive fathers
- ▼ Lack of stability
- ▼ Excessive needs
- ▼ Mobility

Parental Skills & Knowledge

- ▲ Valuable ideas
- ▲ Knowledge and skills
- ▲ Love and care
- ▲ Supervision
- ▼ Lack of knowledge
- ▼ Lack of monitoring

Community Practices & Policies Assessment Worksheet

Fill in a description of the policies of your school or school district. What policies or practices serve as community-related barriers and supports for students at high risk for dropping out of school? Which way does the balance tip?

▲ *Supports*	▼ *Barriers*

Review of ABC project community supports and barriers:

Availability & Access

- ▲ Human resources
- ▲ Job programs
- ▼ Unresponsive criminal justice system
- ▼ Lack of recreational programs
- ▼ Lack of mental health practitioners
- ▼ Lack of effective treatment
- ▼ Lack of transportation
- ▼ Not enough jobs

Community Safety & Cohesion

- ▲ Community services in schools
- ▲ Business partnerships
- ▲ Safety units
- ▼ Stratified community practice
- ▼ Lack of community safety

Appendices

A • Methodology & Procedures

This appendix presents a step-by-step description of how the information for this publication was generated and refined.

Step One

The eight project directors and the project officer met in July, 1994, to discuss the barriers and supports that influence students' connection with school. The discussion was based on the past four years' experience in implementing dropout prevention and intervention programs for adolescents with learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities.

Step Two

The meeting participants' notes were transcribed and organized by context (home, community, school) and by type of practice (barrier, support). The statements were edited for clarity and reviewed for completeness.

Step Three

The typed document was then formatted and given a rating scale in order for each project to determine whether the referenced policy or practice was just a one-time occurrence or whether it happened with greater frequency. The rating used was a four-point frequency scale, in which 1 = *never occurred or only occurred once*; 2 = *occurred relatively infrequently, but definitely more than once*; 3 = *occurred relatively frequently*; and 4 = *occurred almost all the time*. The scale also included the response option *not applicable*.

Step Four

One completed survey from each project was used to tally the results. Where two ratings were completed for a single project, the responses of the project director closest to the intervention activities were used.

Step Five

The practices and policies included in the main text are those that were rated as a "3" or more by at least two projects. This step was intended to focus the document on those issues that were most prevalent or common to the majority of the projects and to exclude those issues that rarely occurred.

B • Practices & Policies and Project Ratings of Frequency

This appendix provides a list of all the practices and policies that served to either facilitate or inhibit students' connection with school. A summary of the three projects' ratings regarding the frequency with which supports and barriers occurred is also included. In the table below, A = *ALAS*, B = *Belief Academy*, and C = *Check & Connect*.

Statements were rated as:

1 = Never occurred or only occurred once
2 = Occurred relatively infrequently, but definitely more than once
3 = Occurred relatively frequently
4 = Occurred almost all the time
NA = Not applicable

The practices and policies in the list are organized as follows:

Supportive Practices and Policies
School Supports
Family Supports
Community Supports

Alienating Practices and Policies
School Barriers
Family Barriers
Community Barriers

■ School Supports	A	B	C
• Multicultural recognition through various festivals and cultural activities to celebrate differences.	4	3	3
• True teaming in a restructured school.	1	3	3
• Access to GED programs for parents.	1	3	3
• After-school activities that include transportation services.	1	4	3
• Teachers taking it upon themselves to do something outside class, i.e., individual initiative, teachers who connect with kids.	2	3	2
• Building principals truly responsible for the education of youth with disabilities.	1	2	2
• Discipline practices that promote competencies in students, with a health promotion orientation.	1	—	2
• Hiring parents of high-risk youth to work in the schools.	1	2	2
• Transfers to effective treatment programs.	2	2	2

■ Family Supports	A	B	C
• Parents offer valuable ideas when encouraged/given the chance.	3	4	4
• Attending IEP and other school meetings.	4	3	3
• Parents who love and care about their children (this is almost all parents – all parents want kids to succeed and do well in school).	4	4	4
• Supervision – good parenting, in conjunction with monitoring.	2	3	3
• Using their own knowledge and skills, before and/or after those strategies have been identified and discussed.	3	2	3
• Regularly monitoring child's grades, attendance, peers, clothes.	2	2	3

• Accepting child's disability and understanding the nature of the disability without coddling.	3	2	2
• Staying in contact with teachers and school staff, and persisting with what they say they will do.	2	2	2
• Being active in community support services (e.g., support groups, after-school activities).	1	2	2

■ **Family Supports**	**A**	**B**	**C**
• Enough resource staff (e.g., social workers, outreach workers, chemical dependency workers, truancy workers, psychologists).	3	3	3
• Federal jobs programs.	3	3	3
• Nonprofit community organizations.	4	3	3
• Business partnerships.	1	3	3
• City park and recreation programs.	2	3	3
• Community safety units, neighborhood watch, block captains, etc.	1	4	3
• Organizations that come into schools to offer support and to provide services (e.g., local women's college running group on women's issues).	3	3	2
• Tutoring supports.	4	3	2
• Joint funded positions (e.g., drug and alcohol treatment, gang intervention, family intervention).	3	2	2
• Mini-clinic, co-located services, school-linked services.	1	4	2

■ **School Barriers**	**A**	**B**	**C**
• District and school level uncertainty, which results in last minute planning and chaotic implementation.	4	4	4
• Failure to make instructional accommodations for students being served in regular education classrooms.	4	4	3
• Fears or reluctance about interactions (e.g., teachers afraid to go to homes, parents afraid to visit or intimidated by the schools).	4	3	3
• Fragmented service delivery to child in school and across systems.	4	4	3
• Lack of school awareness about the home.	3	3	3
• Rigid adherence to roles and boundaries of school personnel.	4	3	3
• School's failure to adequately use community resources and family resources coming into (reaching out to) the schools.	4	3	3
• Staff overwhelmed by many issues and have limited view of roles and responsibilities (e.g. not their job to teach social skills, morality).	4	3	3
• Systemic disincentives to change.	4	3	4
• Lack of effective communication within the school and between home and school and failure to act upon communication.	4	2	3
• Legality of practices. Special education laws are being broken and rules being over used (e.g., focus on IEP not intervention).	4	4	2

▪ Punitive disciplinary practices not designed to change behavior (e.g., out-of-school suspension).	4	2	3
▪ Rigid instructional milieu and milieu of institution drives practice.	4	3	2
▪ Teachers making inaccurate assumptions about families (e.g., families do not care about their kids).	4	2	3
▪ Timeliness between assessment and placement. Delays involved for IEP services; services occur long time after assessment.	4	3	2
▪ Administrative ("opportunity") transfers in response to behaviors.	3	2	2
▪ Lack of effective student advocates or case managers in the schools.	4	2	2
▪ No recognition opportunities for "at risk" kids.	3	2	2
▪ Rigid scheduling and inflexibility. Rigid adherence to logistical practices and instructional policies.	4	2	2
▪ School failure to effectively monitor students' attendance.	4	2	2

■ **Family Barriers**	A	B	C
▪ Excessive needs of kids and families and the amount of effort required.	4	4	3
▪ Inactive fathers and/or uninvolved fathers.	4	3	3
▪ Lack of knowledge about and/or use of alternative discipline practices in the home.	4	3	3
▪ Mobility of families.	3	3	3
▪ Chemical, alcohol, substance abuse in families.	3	3	2
▪ Family not monitoring the behaviors/activities of children.	4	2	3
▪ Unstable family configuration and location; unpredictable family life.	3	3	2
▪ Physical and mental health issues coupled with lack of resources to address needs.	3	4	2
▪ Parents blaming teachers for things out of their control.	2	3	2
▪ Physical violence in families.	2	3	2
▪ Surrogate parents incapable of handling themselves, much less kids.	2	2	2
▪ Parents' unwillingness to make necessary sacrifices to parent children.	2	2	2
▪ Terminally resistant families and families that see a limited role in the education of their child.	1	2	2

■ **Family Barriers**	A	B	C
▪ Community practices that increase stratification between class and race; presence of gangs; clash between teachers and students.	4	4	3
▪ Criminal justice system for kids is nonresponsive to the needs of youth (defer until too late, or overly strict). Need to get treatment in place right away.	4	4	3
▪ Lack of mental health practitioners, especially with ethnic match and bilingual skills.	4	4	3
▪ Lack of transportation.	4	3	3

▪ Community safety, getting to and from school.	4	4	2
▪ Lack of effective treatment programs (e.g., punitive drug and alcohol treatment).	3	4	2
▪ Lack of recreational programs after-school and in the summer.	4	3	2
▪ Not enough job slots for all the youth who would like to work.	4	4	2
▪ Family preservation at all costs, which at times leaves kids without any family at all.	3	NA	1
▪ Mandatory background checks on anyone volunteering to work in the schools costs too much for schools, and businesses are offended when asked to pay.	NA	3	2
▪ Automatic exclusion of youth with special needs from non-school programs (e.g., summer job programs).	1	2	1

NOTE: *Please see the key to this appendix on page 19.*

C • The Federal Initiative

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), established three cooperative agreements under a program competition called "Dropout Prevention and Intervention Programs for Junior High School Students in Special Education." The programs were to focus on youth with learning and emotional and behavioral disabilities, with priority given to programs using a collaborative approach across spheres of influence – home, school, and community. Projects were funded from 1990 to 1995 to develop, refine, and evaluate dropout prevention and intervention strategies. This booklet is one of a series of five collaboratively developed products.

■ ALAS

ALAS stands for "Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success" and means "wings" in Spanish. The ALAS program focused on adolescents and their families, school, and community. ALAS was founded on the premise that the youth and their contexts of influence must be addressed simultaneously if dropout prevention efforts are to be successful. Assumptions central to the model are that each context needs individual reform to increase its positive influence on youth, and that barriers to communication and coherence between contexts must be bridged.

■ Belief Academy

Belief Academy consisted of five major components: program stability over time; intensive academic and behavioral intervention in grades seven and eight; family case management services; social support to students; and program options and ongoing support at the high school level. The Academy was based on several assumptions relating to students' skills in reading and math: the need for intensive instructional procedures with culturally relevant instruction; the needs of family or out-of-school activities that interfere with student progress; students' affiliation with the school program; the self-esteem and confidence of individual students; and the need for students and their families to constantly focus on and plan for post high school goals, in conjunction with a long-term support program that provides viable options for the goals to be achieved.

■ Check & Connect

Check & Connect/Partnership for School Success addressed the interacting systems of family, school, and community. The "Check" involves continuous assessment of student levels of engagement with school, by monitoring daily incidences of tardiness, absences, behavior referrals, suspensions, failing grades, and mobility. The "Connect" involves both monthly core connect strategies, and the addition of supplemental interventions when youth engaged in risk behaviors. This project is based on four assumptions: solving the dropout problem will require a multicomponent effort of home, school, community, and youth; leaving school prior to graduation is not an instantaneous event; students must be empowered to take control of their own behavior; and schools must be designed to reach out to families in partnership with the community.

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ABC Dropout Prevention & Intervention Series Publications

- ***PACT Manual: Parent and Community Teams for School Success***
- ***Relationship Building & Affiliation Activities in School-Based Dropout Prevention Programs***
- ***Staying in School: Strategies for Middle School Students with Learning & Emotional Disabilities***
- ***Staying in School: A Technical Report of Three Dropout Prevention Projects for middle School Students with Learning and Emotional Disabilities***
- ***Tip the Balance: Practices & Policies That Influence School Engagement for Youth at High Risk for Dropping Out***